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REMARKS BY

ASSISTANT SECRETARY ANNE C. RICHARD ON U.S. POLICIES ON REFUGEES AND MIGRATION MOVEMENTS

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Thank you so much for organizing this event. This is my first time in Bangladesh and I am happy to be here. Bangladesh is a valued partner in so many ways. In its history your nation has confronted great hardship but you have also consistently demonstrated how fierce determination and enlightened policies can foster economic development and progress.

Bangladesh has made impressive gains –in the fight against poverty and dramatic improvements in nutrition, maternal and child health, education, and empowering women and girls. Bangladesh is the only country that participates in all three of President Obama’s major development initiatives – on health, food security, and climate change.

As you know, Bangladesh also contributes to peace and stability around the world, providing more international peacekeepers than any other nation. The United States is profoundly grateful for their courage and self-sacrifice and what they do every day to protect some of the most vulnerable people in the world. My bureau at the State Department, the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration or PRM, contributes to providing these same populations with life-saving humanitarian aid. So our missions are intertwined.

Of course, I already know Foreign Secretary Haque. We last met in Washington to discuss the much-welcomed national strategy on the undocumented Burmese Nationals in Bangladesh. He also worked for 11 years with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), one of my Bureau’s largest partners.

Foreign Secretary Haque has asked me to talk about U.S. policies on refugees and migration movements. At the onset, let me acknowledge that the past year has been a very tough one.

We are coping with a large number of crises around the world, including some very ugly wars. The war in Syria alone, the worst man-made calamity in a generation, has driven 12 million

people from their homes, bringing untold anguish, and jeopardizing peace and stability throughout the region.

According to the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, globally, over 50 million people have been forcibly displaced – the most since World War II.

And this past year, things went from bad to worse. ISIL imposed a reign of terror on roughly a third of Iraq. Civil wars spread chaos and suffering across South Sudan and the Central African Republic. Separatists began fighting to dismember Ukraine. And war broke out in Gaza between Hamas and Israel.

Secretary Kerry and my other colleagues at the State Department are using all the tools we have to try to quell the violence. And on the humanitarian front, we are doing everything that we can to save civilians caught in the crossfire or forced to flee. This is daunting.

Conflicts seem more protracted than ever before. New ones erupt, while the old ones drag on. These are primarily civil wars, and disputes that seem to defy traditional diplomacy and international consensus.

And all too often the violence is indiscriminate. Rather than sparing women, children, innocent civilians and relief workers, some militants are targeting them intentionally.

The United States has worked with other governments, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to mount an unprecedented response. We are the world's largest donor to humanitarian efforts. Last year, my Bureau, together with our counterparts that work on disaster and food aid at USAID, provided more than \$6 billion in humanitarian assistance around the world.

Each crisis is unique. I have just come from Burma, where hopes for the future are threatened by ethnic and religious rivalries and violence. Since 2011, violence in Kachin and northern Shan States has internally displaced an estimated 100,000 people. And since 2012, fighting in Rakhine State between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya communities has displaced 140,000. I visited both of these areas and participated in a high-level Human Rights Dialogue and I'd be happy to talk more about this in the question and answer period.

The United States has been urging the Burmese Government to take steps to end hostilities, build mutual confidence, and establish a political dialogue. At the highest levels, we have repeatedly pressed the Government of Burma to take decisive action to address the root causes of conflict.

We also support programs to help people who are displaced in Rakhine State, including providing food and shelter. These programs help both Muslim and Buddhist communities and seek to deliver aid based on need. Through UNHCR we have helped build new homes for both displaced Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingyas, whose own homes were destroyed in the violence of 2012.

The United States (and I, personally) want to thank Bangladesh for what this nation has done to help vulnerable people. For decades, you have hosted hundreds of thousands of Rohingya. You have coordinated and collaborated with international humanitarian organizations and the diplomatic community, and you have launched the national Strategy for Undocumented Myanmar Nationals, which can help provide critical humanitarian assistance and protection.

In this region, and around the world, we use diplomacy and financial support to focus attention on those caught up in conflict, to protect and care for them, and uphold their human rights. And we are constantly looking for ways to do this better.

Across the globe, we see patterns – both challenges and opportunities – emerging. Our humanitarian policies reflect this changing landscape.

One priority issue for the United States is responding to the plight of millions of urban refugees.

Two-thirds of the refugees UNHCR now serves live outside of camps, and most live in cities. In this region, that trend is even more pronounced. The refugee population in Bangkok has exploded, and includes people from more than 30 countries. Most refugees in India and all of Malaysia's more than 100,000 refugees live in cities and towns. Just last month, my Bureau funded a UNHCR workshop for the region in Bangkok, which brought together practitioners to share best practices and devise action plans for assisting urban refugees.

The length of time people typically remain in exile has changed too. The average refugee has been in exile for two decades. That means we need to think beyond simply providing life-saving assistance and look at long-term opportunities including education and jobs. In Thailand, the international community has pushed this approach. Burmese refugees have lived in the nine camps on the Thailand-Burma border for over thirty years. Now they can take part in technical and vocational training, apprenticeships, and micro-enterprise development programs, so that they can restart their lives when the time is right for their voluntary return to Burma.

We know that some displaced are more vulnerable than others and the programs we support take that into account. Girls and women are especially susceptible to exploitation and violence. Now we see an opportunity to confront this problem – to build on growing international consensus that gender-based violence can and must be stopped. As Secretary Kerry has said, “Gender-based violence plagues every country and it perpetuates conflict. It creates instability that can flow from generation to generation, and it tears apart the ability of states to hold together as states in some cases. It makes all nations that experience it less secure, less prosperous, and clearly less free.”

Secretary Kerry's signature Safe from the Start initiative is helping international organizations and NGOs to begin addressing sexual and gender-based violence the very outset of their response to conflicts, not just to provide protection and services to victims, but to prevent these human rights abuses from happening in the first place.

Another global problem that demands our attention is statelessness. There are at least 10 million stateless persons around the world, and over one third of them are children.

This status – this lack of citizenship anywhere – is crippling, and is passed from generation to generation. Stateless people suffer a host of indignities. They may miss out on schooling, health care, social services, lawful employment, and equal protection under the law. The stateless have no passports, and often cannot move freely even within their home country. Without legal protection, stateless people are especially susceptible to abuses including arbitrary arrest and detention, trafficking, sexual and physical violence.

In Burma, as you know, the majority of the Rohingya population remains stateless as a result of the fact that they are not recognized as a distinct ethnic group in the country's citizenship law. Statelessness is a root cause of the suffering and displacement that the Rohingya are experiencing inside Burma, and a key reason they flee to neighboring countries.

The United States supports UNHCR's mandate to prevent and reduce statelessness and to protect stateless persons. We applaud its Global Campaign to End Statelessness over the next 10 years. This is an ambitious goal, but I believe it is achievable. Already we have seen progress. Since 2003, over four million stateless persons have acquired a nationality. Bangladesh provided a shining example when in 2008, your High Court recognized 300,000 Urdu-speakers as citizens. And we appreciate efforts by government officials and community leaders to implement it.

Promoting more humane management of international migration is another urgent humanitarian issue for the United States. Humans have migrated around the globe since before recorded history began. But we are witnessing disturbing trends. Many migrants and refugees end up harmed or killed along the way while traveling in the shadows without documentation. Unscrupulous smugglers and traffickers move people illegally through well-organized networks and are emboldened by the prospects of high profits and impunity.

Every year, thousands of journeys begun in desperation and hope, ended in death. This past year, that number reached 4,272 – twice as many as in 2013.

Many of those who died were attempting to travel by sea. More than half of them – 60% – were crossing the Mediterranean in the hopes of reaching Europe. But obviously, dangerous boat crossings are not limited to Europe. About 54,000 migrants ventured across the Bay of Bengal and 540 of them died. As you know, the Rohingya often risk their lives at sea as well. It is estimated that 16,000 people left the Burma-Bangladesh border by boat in just four weeks between October and November 2014. That's more than have embarked from there in any one month period for the past twenty years. Since the violence that erupted in June of 2012, an estimated 100,000 people have fled by boat.

Coping with irregular migration can be politically and logistically challenging. But our priority is and must be saving lives. In this region, that will mean strengthening search and rescue

operations, harmonizing disembarkation and reception conditions, and offering temporary protection to those who would be at risk if they were sent home.

Together, our governments, and other concerned governments and organizations also need to address reasons that so many people risk these perilous journeys. We must also crack down on organized criminal groups, and develop more regular, humane and safe alternatives to dangerous irregular migration.

Finally, the United States is committed to resettling refugees who cannot return home. More are resettled in the United States than anywhere else – nearly 70,000 in each of the past two years. Last year, nearly 15,000 of those we welcomed were from Burma.

We look forward to expanding our partnership with Bangladesh in the years to come. And one reason I am so glad to be here is to learn from your perspectives and improve my own understanding of the situation for refugees here, so I can help explain it to colleagues in Washington.

Thank you for your time and attention. And I look forward to your questions.

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**As prepared for delivery.*